

# The Destinations of Victorian School Leavers: Key Findings from the *On Track* Project

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## ABSTRACT

*On Track* is a Victorian Government initiative designed to ensure that all students are on a pathway to further education, training or employment after leaving school. It involves making contact with Year 10 to 12 students in the year after they leave school to map their initial destinations and the factors involved, and offering assistance to school leavers who appear to be experiencing a problematic transition. In addition, a longitudinal component follows the post-school experiences of a sub-set of school leavers over a four-year period. The results are provided back to schools, tertiary providers, regions and LLENS to assist with program development. The project, which was launched in 2003, was the first of this scope to be undertaken by an Australian government. In 2008 around 33,300 completers of Year 12 or a vocational equivalent were interviewed, along with 4,700 early leavers. The paper provides an overview of the main trends in Victorian school-leaver pathways since 2003 and key results from the 2008 survey, and discusses their policy implications.

## AIMS OF ON TRACK

The *On Track* project was initiated by the Victorian Government as part of its response to the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria (Kirby, 2000). Since the first large-scale survey in 2003, almost 230,000 school leavers have participated in the *On Track* surveys, providing valuable insights into their post-schooling destinations and pathways. Through their participation, respondents have facilitated understanding of the factors that assist young people in making successful transitions to education, training and employment.

The *On Track* survey:

- offers a consistent and comprehensive approach to monitoring the transitions of school leavers following their exit from schooling or its equivalent;
- reports the survey information to schools, TAFE colleges and other education providers, organisations concerned with assisting young people, policymakers, and the wider public, including parents and students;
- provides a detailed analysis of the destinations of school leavers in order to address issues for particular subgroups in relation to their success in specific pathways;
- provides a referral service for school leavers who appear to be experiencing difficulties in the transition process; and

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- enables education providers to use the data and analyses as part of the process of monitoring and improving their programs.

The survey is intended to provide evidence of any disparities in transition outcomes (e.g. by region or social background) and the characteristics of the cohorts involved. A further important purpose is to use the annual statewide survey to select a sub-group of school leavers to be tracked over a four-year period. Longitudinal data facilitate the analysis of the pathways followed by young people and the causal influences involved. A new longitudinal study will commence in 2009 and will be based on a group of the respondents who took part in the 2008 survey summarised in this paper.

## **SURVEY ADMINISTRATION**

The survey was conducted in April–May 2008 by the Social Research Centre (SRC) in collaboration with ACER. It involved a short telephone survey of school leavers who agreed to participate in the *On Track* survey. At the commencement of the 2007 school year, eligible students were asked to consent to be surveyed after leaving school and relevant contact information was obtained. Separate questionnaires were used for Year 12 or equivalent completers and early leavers.

*Year 12 or equivalent completers* are defined as those who completed a Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), International Baccalaureate (IB) or Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL, Senior or Intermediate). The sample includes those who completed these qualifications in schools (the large majority), Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutes, or adult and community learning organisations.

*Early leavers* are defined as those students in Years 10, 11 and 12 who had registered their details with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) by enrolling in a VCE or VCAL unit and who left school before completing Year 10, 11 or 12.

## **RESPONSE RATES**

### **Year 12 or equivalent completers**

Of the 48,781 Year 12 or equivalent completers in 2007, 43,715 (89.6%) allowed their contact details to be released and the names and telephone numbers of this group were supplied to the research team by the VCAA. Using this file, responses were achieved from 33,250 (68.2%) of all Year 12 or equivalent completers, or 75.9% of those who agreed to take part.

The composition of the achieved sample was only marginally different to that of the target population in terms of gender, school sector, and regional location. This, along with the relatively high response rate, provides confidence that the results are broadly representative of the target population.

### **Early leavers**

The early leaver sample from the VCAA comprised 11,092 individuals. Of these, 4740 early leavers were successfully contacted and surveyed, yielding a response rate of 42.7%.

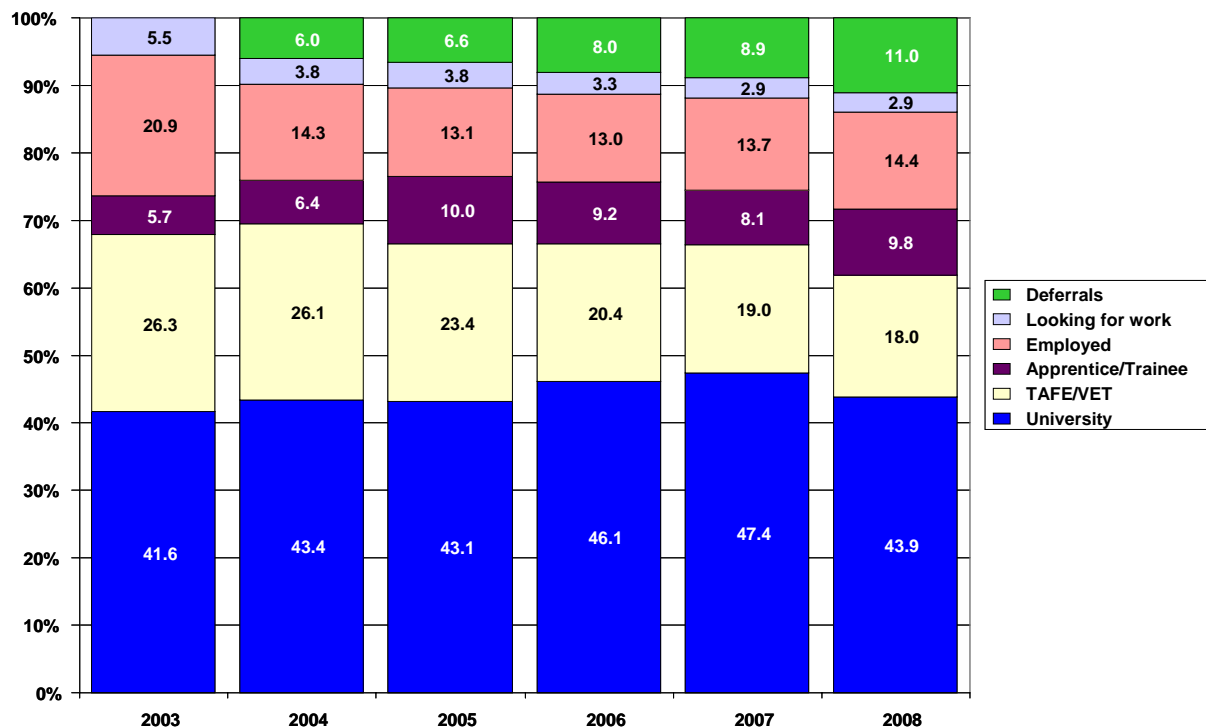
A little over a half (51.9%) of the achieved sample comprised leavers from Year 11. This was about 4 percentage points higher than the proportion of Year 11 leavers in the target sample. A little over one-fifth of the achieved sample (20.2%) were leavers from Year 10 or below, which was 2 percentage points higher than their share of the target sample. Correspondingly, early leavers from Year 12 were under-represented by about 6 percentage points in the achieved sample.

The early leaver data needs to be treated cautiously due to the relatively low overall response rate and evidence of differing response rates among sub-groups. Nevertheless, the *On Track* sample is much larger than any other early leaver data collection and enables more detailed analyses than would otherwise be available.

## TRENDS IN YEAR 12 COMPLETER DESTINATIONS 2003 TO 2008

Figure 1 summarises the destinations of Year 12 or equivalent leavers in the period 2003 to 2008. The data relates to the experiences of the cohort from the year before, so that the 2003 column refers to the situation of the Year 12 or equivalent cohort of 2002 as at April–May 2003, and so on.

**Figure 1 Year 12 or equivalent completers: destinations 2003 to 2008**



*Note: Data reported for 2003–2005 includes Year 12 completers only; data reported for 2006–2008 comprises Year 12 or equivalent completers (namely VCE, IB, VCAL Senior and Intermediate from schools and other providers). Deferral data was not collected in 2003.*

The main trends for the 2003 to 2008 period are as follows.

- University is consistently the most common destination for Year 12 or equivalent completers in the year following school; this proportion has risen since 2003 (41.6%) reaching a high in 2007 (47.4%) before declining in 2008 (43.9%).
- TAFE/VET is the second most common destination, but this proportion has been in fairly steady decline from 2003 (26.3%) to 2008 (18.0%). It may well be that secondary students are not being fully informed about the benefits of participation in TAFE, despite the benefits it can bring (see Curtis, 2008).
- Almost 10% of Year 12 or equivalent completers entered an apprenticeship or traineeship in 2008 (up from 5.7% in 2003) and when this proportion is added to those studying at university or TAFE/VET, almost 72% of the cohort was engaged in some form of education or training in the year following school. This proportion has fluctuated throughout the period but was slightly lower in 2008 than in any other year.
- The proportion of Year 12 or equivalent completers who defer a tertiary place has grown strongly from 6.0% in 2004 (when deferrers were first recorded separately) to 11% in 2008. As most of the deferrers eventually take up a tertiary place (Polesel, 2008) this implies that about 80% of Year 12 or equivalent completers now enter post-school education or training within two or three years after leaving school.

- Employment was the principal activity of 20.9% of the cohort in 2003 and this had apparently declined to 14.4% by 2008. However, since about 90% of the deferees are working, this lifts the actual employment rate to around 24% in 2008, which is the highest proportion for the 2003 to 2008 period.
- The strength of the job market for much of the 2003 to 2008 period would be a major factor in the growth of Year 12 or equivalent completers in employment and in the decline of the proportion of those looking for work from 5.5% in 2003 to 2.9% in 2008. However, if the pessimistic economic growth projections for 2009 are realised then the school leaver job market could be adversely affected. Such a development would lead to two sorts of pressures – those on schools to ensure that they are adequately meeting the needs of some students who would prefer to be working; and on employers and labour market authorities to ensure an adequate supply of apprenticeships, traineeships and entry-level jobs.

## **GENDER DIFFERENCES IN DESTINATIONS**

There are well-known gender differences in patterns of school completion and post-school destinations (McMillan & Curtis, 2008), and these have been documented in previous *On Track* reports. It is important to present school leaver data disaggregated by gender otherwise misleading impressions could be formed.

There are some marked gender differences in destinations among the Year 12 or equivalent completers group in 2008:

- Females were more frequently enrolled in university than males (46.6% compared to 41.3%) or higher-level VET programs (14.8% and 13.9%).
- Males were twice as frequently as females to enter into an apprenticeship or traineeship (13.6% and 6.7%).
- Females were slightly more frequently employed (24.4% and 23.6%) and less frequently looking for work (3.6% and 4.1%).

## **DESTINATIONS BY SENIOR CERTIFICATE AND STUDY STRAND**

Completing Year 12 or its vocational equivalent provides advantages over leaving school early in terms of obtaining a post-school qualification, less time unemployed, higher pay, more on-the-job training and so on (Marks, 2006). There is evidence, though, that school retention rates to Year 12 have risen by only 3 percentage points over the last 10 years, and have actually dropped slightly since 2003 (ABS, 2008). A key policy challenge is to lift education participation but do so by not expecting that the one type of program will meet the needs of all young people.

*On Track* enables the destinations of the Year 12 or equivalent completers group to be examined in terms of type of senior school certificate that they studied, and whether or not they undertook any nationally accredited vocational education and training in school (VET in Schools).

By far the largest proportion (70.2%) studied for the VCE and did not undertake any VET in Schools programs. Almost one-quarter (23.9%) included some VET in Schools programs in their VCE studies, while 5.7% of the sample had enrolled in the VCAL, mostly as part of the VCE. Compared to the previous year, the biggest change for the 2008 sample was evident in the growth of the VCAL and the decline in the proportion of those who had undertaken VET in Schools programs as part of the VCE.

- A little over one-half (52.5%) of the completers who studied the VCE without doing any VET in Schools programs were enrolled in university in April–May 2008. University was also the most common destination (30.1%) for those who included some VET in Schools programs in their VCE although almost as many of these leavers were in employment (29.5%).

- Apprenticeships and traineeships were the most common destination of former VCAL students, accounting for 35.5% of the VCE VCAL group and 39.4% of the VCAL-only group. Employment was the second most common destination: 31.2% of the VCE VCAL group and 26.2% of the VCAL-only group were employed.
- Study in VET is an important destination for leavers from all programs, particularly for those who had undertaken VET in Schools programs (22.4%), VCE VCAL (21.3%) and VCAL only (19.7%).
- Smaller proportions of those who had undertaken the VCE were looking for work in April–May 2008 than those who had undertaken the VCAL.

## **SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS AND YEAR 12 COMPLETER DESTINATIONS**

*On Track* uses a measure of SES based on students' home address when in Year 12. Student SES and post-school destinations are clearly related.

- Completers from the highest SES quartile were more frequently enrolled in university in April–May 2008 than students in the other three quartiles.
- Completers from the lower SES quartiles were more frequently enrolled in VET courses than those from higher quartiles and studying entry-level VET rather than Certificate IV and above.
- There were only small differences evident in the proportions entering an apprenticeship/traineeship from among the three lower SES quartiles, but the proportion from the highest SES group was about 4 to 7 percentage points lower.
- Completers from the lowest SES quartile were more frequently in the labour market either employed or looking for work than those from the highest quartile. The differences among the three lowest SES quartiles in terms of labour market status were only fairly small. The largest difference is evident with the highest SES group.

In comparison with earlier years of *On Track*, the impact of SES on post-school destinations seems to have weakened slightly over time. This is broadly consistent with research on education participation based on national longitudinal data has suggested that, although SES is still a significant influence, its influence is declining over time (Curtis & McMillan, 2008). Nevertheless, the role of SES is still substantial and it is important to better understand the ways that SES influences educational pathways and how policies can be designed to reduce its impact.

## **DEFERRING TERTIARY STUDY**

In April–May 2008, 11.0% of the Year 12 or equivalent completer group indicated that they had been offered a tertiary place but had deferred it until 2009. Deferral rates were much higher among those who attended school in non-metropolitan regions than in metropolitan regions. About 90% of the deferrers were employed in April–May 2008.

The reasons given by deferrers were different in important respects from those of other Year 12 or equivalent completers who did not undertake further study. Nearly 90% said they were taking a gap year and just over 60% indicated they were not ready to begin tertiary study. One-half (53.1%) indicated they wanted to get a job and only 15% thought they would not cope with further study.

The costs of study as a factor was chosen by about one-third of deferrers and one-quarter were concerned about the costs of travel. Academic factors were less relevant because deferrers had already accepted offered places. Only 7.5% of deferrers said they failed to get into the course of their choice and a small minority (15.5%) cited the uncertainty of coping with their workload.

Polesel (2008) used earlier *On Track* data to examine the experiences of regional deferrers from the 2006 Year 12 cohort. It was found that subsequently 82.3% of those who indicated that they had

deferred a tertiary place were enrolled in some form of education or training (although not always in the course they had initially deferred).

## REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN POST-YEAR 12 DESTINATIONS

There were major regional differences in the patterns of destinations among Year 12 or equivalent completers. All non-metropolitan regions have lower rates of transition to tertiary study than do metropolitan regions.

Young people exiting Year 12 in country Victoria were more frequently employed or seeking work, including employment-based training through apprenticeships or traineeships. Overall, there was a 15.4 percentage point gap in the proportion entering the labour market with no further education or training between country Victoria and metropolitan Melbourne.

These regional differences are even more marked when academic achievement is considered. In non-metropolitan Victoria, only the highest General Achievement Test (GAT) achievers enter into some form of post-school education or training at rates even close to the state-wide average for all school leavers. Conversely, in most metropolitan regions, it is only the lowest GAT achievers who do not exceed this state-wide average.

There are also regional differences in the reasons given by Year 12 or equivalent completers for not continuing in education or training. These seem to relate strongly to inequitable access to education and training institutions, but economic factors associated with isolation and the socioeconomic profile of different regions also have an impact.

In general, the higher the level of disadvantage, the lower the proportion of ‘positive’ transition outcomes (defined as being in education, training or full-time employment). However, Western Metropolitan region and, to a lesser extent, Northern Metropolitan region are counter to this pattern. Both regions experienced a higher proportion of positive outcomes than would have been predicted on the basis of their relatively high level of socio-demographic disadvantage.

A key policy priority is to improve transition outcomes for those in non-metropolitan regions. In this regard there could be useful policy lessons from examining the factors that have contributed to areas such as Western Metropolitan achieving relatively high proportions of positive transition outcomes.

## EARLY LEAVERS’ DESTINATIONS

The destinations of early leavers as of April–May 2008 are summarised in Table 1. Just over half of the early leavers undertook some form of education or training in their first year out from school (55.1%). The proportion of female early leavers who went on to some form of education or training was much smaller than the proportion of male early leavers who followed this pathway. More than half of all female early leavers (54.9%) entered the labour force without undertaking further education or training, compared with 39.3% of males. While rates of full-time employment were similar for males and females (18.8% and 20.4%, respectively), female early leavers in employment were more than twice as frequently as males to be in part-time work.

**Table 1 Destinations of early leavers, by gender (%)**

<b>Destination</b>	<b>Males %</b>	<b>Females %</b>	<b>All %</b>
VET	11.1	20.6	14.6
Apprentice	44.3	13.7	33.2
Trainee	5.3	10.8	7.3
Working full-time	18.8	20.4	19.3
Working part-time	8.2	17.4	11.6
Looking for work	12.3	17.1	14.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Destinations were strongly associated with the year level at which an early leaver exited from school. In general, greater proportions of those who left earlier, compared to those who left in senior secondary years, entered a basic VET course at a TAFE institute or community or private provider. In addition, of those who left school in Year 10 or below during 2007, 44.3% entered an apprenticeship. Among Year 11 leavers, 34.5% entered an apprenticeship, and among Year 12 leavers, 22.6% followed this pathway.

The higher the year-level of exit, the greater the proportion of early leavers who were working in either a full-time or part-time capacity. Across all exit points (Year 10, 11 and 12) the proportions of leavers experiencing a more problematic transition from school were similar, with approximately 14% of each group of early leavers looking for work.

## **REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN EARLY LEAVER DESTINATIONS**

There was considerable variation in the destinations of early leavers according to ABS labour force region. While for Victoria as a whole, 60.7% of male early leavers entered some recognised form of education or training, this ranged from a low of 38.5% in the Inner Melbourne region to a high of 68.5% in the Gippsland region. Apprenticeships contributed significantly to the overall higher rate of transition to further education and training for males in country Victoria.

Enrolment in entry-level VET courses played a much larger role for female early leavers than for males. Apprenticeships, on the other hand, played a much smaller role for females, and the proportion of females in traineeships was usually not high enough to bring participation in all employment-based training to a level of equality. In some regions, such as the north-western and inner northern, outer-western and south-eastern suburbs, the proportion of females either working or looking for work was very high, with approximately six in every ten female early leavers in the labour force without further education or training.

## **THE JOBS OF EARLY LEAVERS**

Early leavers are concentrated in a narrower range of jobs than Year 12 or equivalent completers. The jobs most frequently found by early leavers who do not enter further education or training highlight the difficulties of early leaving. For males the three most common jobs were in labouring (12.1%), retail (10.3%) and hospitality (8.8%). Female early leavers are even more heavily concentrated, with 29.0% of those employed working in retail and 18.1% in hospitality. In general, these are jobs with a high proportion of part-time employment and generally low wages and skill requirements.

More than one-half of males in employment (55.0%) work in the three occupational areas of retail sales (21.4%), labouring (19.0%) and hospitality (14.7%). For females, retail sales (42.5%) and hospitality (27.4%) were the most common jobs, accounting for almost seven in every ten workers (69.9%). With the exception of labouring (where males are employed at far higher rates than females), these are the occupational groups with a preponderance of part-time work, and where wages and skill requirements are generally low.

## **REASONS FOR LEAVING SCHOOL EARLY**

An early departure from school is often due to a combination of reasons rather than a single factor. Polesel and Helme (2004) describe the various influences leading to early school leaving as 'push' and 'pull' factors. 'Push' factors operate from within the school setting, in a mostly negative manner, and act to drive young people away from the school environment. 'Pull' factors arise from beyond the school setting and work to attract individuals and into another pathway (for example, apprenticeship, traineeship, employment), thus acting in a predominantly positive way.

The vast majority of males (84.7%) and females (67.4%) indicated that they left school because they 'wanted to get an apprenticeship or traineeship'. The second most frequently nominated reason was

'no longer wanted to be a school student'; males reported this as a reason slightly more frequently than females (62.9% compared with 57.1%, respectively).

Already having a job, apprenticeship or traineeship to go to was cited as reason for leaving school by more than four in every ten early leavers (51.7% of males and 34.3% of females). Similar proportions of male and female leavers cited a desire to attend TAFE as a factor in their decision to leave school (43.5% and 46.0%, respectively).

Greater proportions of those who left in Year 12 cited having a job or training to go to or wanting to access an apprenticeship or traineeship as a factor in their decision compared to those who leave in Year 10 or earlier. No longer wanting to be a student was similarly more commonly reported as a factor in the decision of later leavers than those who left prior to senior secondary school. Early leavers who exited at Year 10 or below more frequently cited poor performance or inability to cope with the schoolwork as reasons for their decision.

## **FACTORS IN STAYING AT SCHOOL**

The *On Track* data reinforce the importance of providing a variety of pathways and greater flexibility in schooling arrangements. When early leavers were asked what would have made a difference to their decision to leave school, the most important factor nominated by early leavers concerned the delivery arrangements of schooling and accommodation of employment while studying. More than half of all respondents (54.0%) agreed that if they could have studied part-time while working they would have been less likely to leave school.

Similar proportions of respondents indicated they would have stayed on at school had they had access to a wider range of subjects (48.1%), or if scheduling of classes had been more flexible (47.5%). The availability of vocational programs was nominated as a reason to stay at school by 46.1% of early leavers, while being treated in a more adult-like manner was an important consideration for 45.7% of the group. Least important were social factors, such as having greater opportunities to mix with other students (34.2%) or having more support from the school in dealing with personal problems (29.0%).

## **RESPONDENTS REQUESTING REFERRALS**

One of the main findings from research on youth transitions is that the young people who struggle most are those who do not get a job or further training shortly after leaving school (Marks, 2006). Unfortunately, it is this group of early leavers who are likely to fare even worse in any economic downturn. It is important therefore, that young people at risk in the transition process are identified as quickly as possible and offered appropriate support.

At the time of the *On Track* survey, respondents who had not continued in education or training and were either working in a part-time capacity or were looking for work, are asked whether they wished to be contacted in order to be advised about study and employment opportunities. The responses generated by this question allowed an intervention to be made for individuals who requested it. Such referrals were managed by the relevant Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN).

### **Year 12 or equivalent completers requesting referrals**

In all, 3928 Year 12 or equivalent completers who were not in education or training, and were either working part-time or looking for work (a total of 11.8%) were invited to receive further assistance or advice. This group was then further divided into those requesting a referral (3.6%) and those refusing it (8.2%). There were only minor differences between male and female respondents in their response behaviours. The proportions offered a referral were generally lower in metropolitan than in non-metropolitan LLENs.

The number of completers who were offered a referral in 2008 was 1340 lower than in 2007. This was essentially because the proportion of the sample who were not in education or training, and were either working part-time or looking for work, had declined.

### **Early leavers requesting referrals**

In the 2008 sample of early leavers there were 1133 respondents who were offered a referral, which represented 23.9% of the group. (This was twice the proportion of offers in the Year 12 or equivalent group.) Among the early leavers 10.0% accepted a referral and 13.9% declined.

The number of early leavers who were offered a referral in 2008 was 540 higher than in 2007. This essentially was because the early leaver sample was much larger in 2008 (mainly due to a higher response rate). The proportion of the early leaver sample who were not in education or training, and were either working part-time or looking for work (the 'target' group for referrals) in fact declined slightly from 2007 to 2008.

There were some marked gender differences in the early leaver group. A much higher proportion of females were offered a referral than males. This was essentially because more female early leavers were employed part-time or looking for work. Female early leavers accepted the offer of a referral at twice the rate (14.7%) of males (7.3%). Referrals were generally higher in non-metropolitan areas.

### **IN CONCLUSION**

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) set the following targets for youth transitions:

- lift the Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate to 90 per cent by 2020;
- at least halve the gap for Indigenous students in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020; and
- ensure more young people make a successful transition from compulsory schooling to full-time employment including further education and training.

Due to its relatively high education participation rates (in terms of Year 12 retention and tertiary education) Victoria is probably closer to achieving the national targets than most other jurisdictions. Nevertheless, the *On Track* data indicate that considerable challenges ahead in lifting educational attainment among groups and regions where rates are still relatively low.

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For further information about *On Track* and its publications see:

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/ontrack/>